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RHMFISI/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
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STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG
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SUBJECT: PRT/PANJSHIR: Feud Called "Family Affair"

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) Panjshir Governor Bahlul and NDS Director Saleh, both Panjshiris, have feuded recently, throwing light not only on their personal differences but also on Panjshiri cohesiveness. When matters threatened to boil over, Panjshiri heavyweights stepped in to close ranks. The episode is revealing: Panjshiris are a close-knit sub-population and insist that internal conflicts "stay in the family." End Summary.

Background

¶2. (SBU) A running feud between Panjshiri Governor Bahlul and NDS Director Saleh, both Panjshiris, flared up in May and continues to simmer. Both accuse the other of treachery in connection with a jailbreak on May 16 in Panjshir involving NDS personnel. Putting aside the disputed details of the episode, their clash is revealing about the Panjshiris in several ways.

Foreground

¶3. (SBU) Their quarrel is personal, and is, at heart, about differing styles: Bahlul, the rough-hewn former mujahideen, against Saleh, the young English-speaking sophisticate. A touchstone in Panjshiri politics is

whether someone served as a commander during the struggles against the Soviets and Taliban. Bahlul did; Saleh did not. The split is partly generational, although Bahlul is only a half-dozen years older, he appeals to the older, more traditional Panjshiris, while Saleh works with the younger Panjshiris in Kabul.

¶4. (SBU) Their differences are not ideological and do not extend to questions concerning PRT activities or provincial development. Bahlul and Saleh both support the PRT and believe the province is headed in the right direction. The PRT maintains close ties with the Governor and sees Saleh occasionally when he visits his home (near the PRT office). Last year, as the PRT was poised to establish itself in the valley, Saleh had a long talk with PRT officers. His main points - honor Panjshiri pride, recognize Panjshiri contributions, respect local tradition - would also gain easy endorsement from the Governor.

¶5. (SBU) Intervention was necessary. Panjshiri heavyweights had to induce Bahlul and Saleh to bury the hatchet. According to our contacts, those Panjshiris who intervened were Meshrano Jerga member Fahim Khan, VP Massoud and Wolesi Jerga Speaker Qanooni. Of the three, Fahim Khan was the most active in promoting reconciliation. He stepped in to finance a new mosque in Bazarak, next to the Governor's temporary office in Panjshir, reportedly at a cost of 135,000 USD. He told Panjshiris the construction was meant to symbolize renewal, both in personal and provincial terms.

¶6. (SBU) Panjshiris closed ranks. Several large gatherings, in Kabul and in Panjshir, took place to

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offer public support to a Bahlul-Saleh reconciliation. To this end, 200 former mujahideen congregated at the Kabul Intercontinental in late May; and over 100 locals met in Panjshir in early June. Fahim Khan told us it was important that the two shook hands in front of fellow Panjshiris (which they did at the Kabul Intercontinental).

¶7. (SBU) The dispute was "a family affair." This description, from the Governor, suggests the tight-knit nature of Panjshiri society. When matters threatened to boil over, the Panjshiris resolved to settle the issue internally. They wanted to avoid showing cracks in their group to the outside world.

¶8. (SBU) Neither Bahlul nor Saleh lost his job because of the spat, however, as both are deemed too important. But someone, evidently, had to go. The "fall guy" turned out to be the local NDS chief in Panjshir, Habib Rahman, who was replaced by Mohammed Salem. One of our contacts said that Rahman "mishandled the dispute and had to be released."

¶9. (SBU) There are two Panjshiri populations: one is in the province itself, and the other has relocated to Kabul. The latter group comprises the political class (including Fahim Kahn, Massoud, Qanooni and Saleh himself), as well as many young men seeking jobs in the capital. The Bahlul-Saleh spat threw into relief the province-capital split. Bridge-builders -- those who can operate in both places -- are necessary to prevent the gap from widening.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The Bahlul-Saleh feud is revealing, not only about their personal differences, but also about

the Panjshiri cohesiveness. Bahlul and Saleh will never be close. At the moment, they are scarcely on speaking terms. But the notion of a Panjshiri family prevailed - and now has a monument: A new mosque, now under construction, in the center of Bazarak that will accommodate over 1,000 souls.